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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ET](#)
SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: OROMO OPPOSITION LEADERS DISCUSS
POLITICAL SITUATION AT HOME AND ABROAD

Classified By: CHARGE JANET WILGUS FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: At an August 19 lunch hosted by Charge Huddleston, Oromo leaders from the opposition ONC and OFDM as well as former president Negaso Gidada indicated that most Oromos favor participation in the Parliament by Oromo opposition parties. According to these opposition leaders, two of whom recently visited the U.S., the OLF continues to enjoy significant popular support in the Diaspora, but there is considerable debate over the OLF's recent political alliance with the Amhara-dominated CUD North America. Most agreed, however, that the walls that have long existed between Oromo and Amhara exile communities are slowly coming down. ONC and OFDM leaders related problems that had occurred during joint visits to Oromiya by ruling party and opposition leaders, but noted that the trips were continuing. ONC leader Merera Gudina told the Charge that the ongoing trial of CUD leaders was clearly political and needed a political solution. He and other opposition leaders agreed that a significant release of Oromo prisoners -- which the GOE is reportedly considering for Ethiopian New Year in September -- could convince popular opinion that the ruling party was serious about reconciliation. Opposition leaders expect the political dialogue between the ruling party and opposition parties, including the UEDF/ONC and OFDM, to resume soon and deal with reform of both the media law and the National Electoral Board. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Charge Huddleston hosted a lunch Aug. 19 for Oromo opposition leaders who had recently returned from travel to the U.S. Invitees included Dr. Merera Gudina of the Oromo National Congress, Bulcha Demeksa of the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement and Dr. Negaso Gidada, an independent MP and former President of the Ethiopia. Ambassadors from Finland, Germany and the European Union also joined the group, along with Pol/Econ Chief (notetaker). The Oromo leaders have been participating, along with United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) Chairman Beyene Petros, in a political dialogue with the ruling party on reforms to key democratic institutions.

MOST OROMOS ABROAD FAVOR ENGAGEMENT AND ALLIANCE WITH CUD

¶3. (C) Merera and Bulcha had recently returned from a major gathering of Oromo intellectuals in Minnesota hosted by the Oromo Studies Organization. The event had allowed the Ethiopian leaders to take the pulse of politically active Oromos in the Diaspora. Merera explained that the Diaspora remained a key factor in Ethiopian politics because the ruling party continued to intimidate those in Ethiopia who would otherwise offer financial support to opposition parties. Political parties in the Diaspora, for their part,

continued to rely on allies within Ethiopia to maintain political involvement on the ground in the country. According to Merera, the "Chinese Wall" that has long separated Oromo exile communities from their Amhara counterparts is beginning to come down. (NOTE: Oromos make up approximately 40 percent of the Ethiopian population while Amharas account for about 30 percent.) The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) continued to dominate Diaspora politics, Merera added. While there were some notable Oromo and Amhara figures who opposed the OLF's surprising alliance with the Amharas in the recently formed Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD), most Oromos seemed to favor growing cooperation between the two groups. Negaso agreed. For his part, Bulcha claimed that the AFD had so far had little impact.

14. (C) OFDM Chairman Bulcha Demeksa reported receiving significant support from U.S.-based Oromos for his decision to participate in Parliament. Merera agreed that most Oromos favored engagement even if they strongly opposed the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Amharas and Gurages, he added, tended to oppose participation in Parliament. Bulcha added, however, that some Oromos in Minnesota had accused Bulcha of "seducing young people" to believe that peaceful change in Ethiopia was possible, arguing that the EPRDF would never leave power peacefully.

JOINT COMMISSION VISITS TO OROMIYA PROBLEMATIC, BUT STILL ON

15. (C) Merera told the Charge that his party was "not seeing dividends yet" from visits to Oromiya by a joint commission composed of representatives from the ONC, OFDM and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), the EPRDF's Oromo affiliate. The ONC Chairman complained that there had been

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no releases of imprisoned party supporters, and that the OPDO reps had refused to visit the town of Ambo, where significant problems had occurred. The ruling party representatives had also refused to visit prisoners in the region. Bulcha recounted that police had rounded up employees from the hotel where OFDM reps were staying while the commission visited the town of Gimbi, telling the employees that they were "harboring agents of the OLF." The employees were quickly released thereafter. Merera also indicated OPDO cadres had harassed some witnesses called by the visiting commission, but added that "information is making its way to the commission anyway." He told the Charge that the investigative trip had briefly fallen apart over the issue of skipping Ambo, but Merera had negotiated with the ruling party to stop in Ambo on the way back to Addis and thus rescued the mission.

AMNESTY FOR IMPRISONED OROMOS COULD PROMOTE RECONCILIATION

16. (C) The Charge told the Oromo leaders that she believed the GOE was working on a list of prisoners to be pardoned or amnestied on the occasion of Ethiopian New Year (Sept. 11). OLF leaders might well be among those pardoned. Bulcha responded that such a gesture could make a significant, positive impact on the current situation. Negaso agreed but added that the release would have to be large-scale in order to affect public opinion. Merera remarked that a significant amnesty could convince the public that the GOE was serious about promoting reconciliation. He added that "if the intention of the GOE was to teach detainees a lesson, they have been there long enough." He hoped that the international community would press harder for the release of political prisoners. (Note: Prison Fellowship, a well connected local NGO, believes there are about 400-500 political prisoners in Oromiya. End Note.)

17. (C) Merera argued that the ongoing trial of CUD leaders was clearly political. Even PM Meles himself had indicated

before during discussions in September 2005 that he had ample evidence of wrong-doing during and after the election campaign -- prior to November unrest -- but had held off on arresting opposition leaders in order to search for a political solution. The ONC chair noted that he himself and other leaders still at liberty had engaged in the same campaign criticisms as those now detained, but had avoided jail by entering Parliament. A political solution was still the right way to deal with the problem, he concluded.

POLITICAL DIALOGUE WILL RESUME ON MEDIA, ELECTION BOARD

¶18. (C) Opposition leaders told the Charge they expect the political dialogue between the ruling party and opposition parties, including the UEDF/ONC and OFDM, to resume soon. The next items on the agenda are reform of the media law and the National Electoral Board. While they remained committed to continuing the dialogue, they pointed out that real agreement had not been reached on amendments to the Parliamentary rules of procedure, which had been implemented with only some of the changes the opposition sought. The Charge told the group that the USG had funded a useful study of best practices on media regulation from selected countries, and would now fund a comparison between those best practices and Ethiopia's draft media law. She urged that the opposition leaders prepare carefully for the next round of discussions so as to take full advantage of the opportunity.

EYES TURNING TO LOCAL ELECTIONS

¶19. (C) Bulcha emphasized the political importance of the next local elections. He claimed that his party was already preparing to participate in the polls in 2007, but noted that the ruling party had said nothing in public about when they would occur. The Charge replied that the GOE had indicated in private that May or June 2007 was the most likely period. Bulcha emphasized the need for the international community to press the GOE to hold the local elections, since the ruling party did not appear eager to do so. All agreed on the need to proceed quickly with restructuring and capacity-building at the NEB to which the GOE has already agreed in private, as well as the appointment of a new board. The Charge relayed the assurances she had received from the Prime Minister that the EPRDF would consult with the opposition on the appointment of the next board.

¶10. (C) EU Ambassador Tim Clarke noted that he had been told

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during his recent visit to Dire Dawa that local elections there would be held in January 2007. (Note: Dire Dawa is Ethiopia's second city and its own metropolitan region. End note.)
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